

William Empson

7

TYPES

of Ambiguity

one could call it a deduction from the fact that they have been fitted into one word.

Ye, who appointed stand,
Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch
What we propound, and loud that all may hear.
(*Paradise Lost*, vi. 565.)

It is a bitter and controlled mood of irony in which Satan gives this address to his gunners; so much above mere ingenuity that the puns seem almost like a generalisation. But here, as for ironical puns in general, to be put into the state of mind intended you must concentrate your attention on the ingenuity; on the way the words are being interpreted both by the gunners themselves and by the angels who have not yet heard of artillery; on the fact that they are puns. I want to insist that the question is not here of 'consciousness' of a device as a whole, but of consciousness of a particular part of it; for one must continually feel doubtful about antitheses involving the idea of 'unconscious,' which, like the infinities of mathematics, may be a convenient fiction or a product of definition. In literary matters it covers a variety of antitheses, as between taste and analysis, and seeing or not seeing the consequences of a proposition; here I mean by the conscious part of the effect the most interesting part, the part to which it is most natural to direct your attention. In this sense, clear or wide distinction between the two meanings concerned is likely to place the ambiguity at the focus of consciousness; threaten to use it as a showpiece to which poetry and relevance may be sacrificed; make it more obvious to the reader, more dependent on being overtly observed, and less intimately an expression of sensibility. Thus its most definite examples are likely to be found, in increasing order of self-consciousness, among the seventeenth-century mystics who stress the conscious will, the eighteenth-century stylists who stress rationality, clarity, and satire, and the harmless nineteenth-century punsters who stress decent above-board fun.

A pun may be justified to the reader, so long as its two parts have not strong associations of their own and do not suggest different modes of judgment, by saying two things, both of which were relevant and expected, or by saying what is expected in two ways which, though different, are seen at once to come to the

III

AN ambiguity of the third type, considered as a verbal matter, occurs when two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously. This is often done by reference to derivation; thus Delilah is

That specious monster, my accomplished snare.

The notes say: *Specious*, 'beautiful and deceitful'; *monster*, 'something unnatural and something striking shown as a sign of disaster'; *accomplished*, 'skilled in the arts of blandishment and successful in undoing her husband.' The point here is the sharpness of distinction between the two meanings, of which the reader is forced to be aware; they are two pieces of information, two parts of the narrative; if ingenuity had not used an accident, they would have required two words.

The meanings of a pun of the third type may, of course, be 'connected' in this sense, that their being put into one word produces an additional effect; thus here they are used to concentrate feeling upon the single line in the speech, focussed in this way to hold all Samson's hatred, when he expresses his grievances against her. Indeed, if the pun is producing *no* additional effect it has no function and is of no interest; and you may say that, in so far as an ambiguity is justified, it is moved upwards or downwards on my scale out of the third type. If this were true, the type would gain in theoretical importance but contain no examples of interest to the reader of poetry. But I think it is not true, because the matter is complicated by questions of consciousness, of the direction of the reader's attention, of the interaction between separated parts of his mind, and of the means by which a pun can be justified to him. To begin with, I should call it an ambiguity of this type when one is mainly conscious of the pun, not of its consequences. There may be an additional meaning, given because two meanings have been fitted into one word, which takes effect only when the reader is attending, not to it, but to the fact that they have been fitted into one word, so that

is a sort of formal satisfaction in such a connection between two ideas, even when they are merely both relevant and need not have been particularly connected. For one is accustomed to such devices being used to connect things in an illuminating way, and there is at least the pleasure of expectation in seeing the shell even when it is empty. Much of the cult of 'style' is a sort of practising in this way. But, indeed, one can say more boldly that Proust's belief, as a matter of novel-writing, is very convincing; that the pleasure in style is continually to be explained by just such a releasing and knotted duality, where those who have been wedded in the argument are bedded together in the phrase; that one must assume that $n+1$ is more valuable than n for any but the most evasively mystical theory of value. Those who adopt this view are taking refuge in the mysterious idea of an organism, of all things working together for good; we shall expect, from this point of view, to find more important cases of ambiguity when several ambiguities are put together, when they belong to my next chapter, and represent a state of mind.

IV

AN ambiguity of the fourth type occurs when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author. Evidently this is a vague enough definition which would cover much of the third type, and almost everything in the types which follow; I shall only consider here its difference from the third type.

One is conscious of the most important aspect of a thing, not the most complicated; the subsidiary complexities, once they have been understood, merely leave an impression in the mind that they were to such-and-such an effect and they are within reach if you wish to examine them. I put into the third type cases where one was intended to be mainly conscious of a verbal subtlety; in the fourth type the subtlety may be as great, the pun as distinct, the mixture of modes of judgment as puzzling, but they are not in the main focus of consciousness because the stress of the situation absorbs them, and they are felt to be natural under the circumstances. Of course, different readers apply their consciousness in different ways, and a line which taken alone would be of the third type may become of the fourth type in its setting; but the distinction, I think, is usually clear.

I never saw that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set,
I found (or thought I found) you did exceed,
The barren tender of a Poet's debt:
And therefore have I slept in your report,
That you yourself being extant well might show,
How far a modern quill doth come too short,
Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,
This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory being dumb,
For I impair not beauty being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
There lives more life in one of your fair eyes,
Than both your Poets can in praise devise.

(*Sonnets*, lxxxiii.)

Shakespeare is the writer upon whom ingenuity has most often been misapplied; and if his syntax appears ambiguous, it may be

ing, may convey a mode of using their antinomies, and so act as creeds. The reason why one grudges Wordsworth this source of strength is that he talks as if he owned a creed by which his half-statements might be reconciled, whereas, in so far as his creed was definite, he found these half-statements necessary to keep it at bay. There is something rather shuffling about this attempt to be uplifting yet non-denominational, to put across as much pantheism as would not shock his readers. I must protest again that I enjoy the lines very much, and find, like everybody else, that I remember them; probably it was necessary for Wordsworth to shuffle, if he was to maintain his peculiar poetical attitude. And, of course, by considering the example in this chapter, I have shown that I regard the shuffling as a deeply-rooted necessity, not conscious at the time when it was achieved. But, perhaps, this last example may show how these methods can be used to convict a poet of holding muddled opinions rather than to praise the complexity of the order of his mind. To the more fruitful sorts of muddle I must proceed in my next chapter.

V

AN ambiguity of the fifth type occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance, there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between two things when the author is moving from one to the other.¹ Shakespeare continually does it:

Our Natures do pursue
Like Rats that ravyn downe their proper Bane
A thirsty evil, and when we drinke we die.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. ii.)

Evidently the first idea was that lust itself was the poison; but the word *proper*, introduced as meaning 'suitable for rats,' but also having an irrelevant suggestion of 'right and natural,' and more exact memory of those (nowadays phosphorus) poisons which are designed to prevent rats from dying in the wainscot, produced the grander and less usual image, in which the eating of the poison corresponds to the Fall of Man, and it is drinking water, a healthful and natural human function, which it is intolerable to avoid, and which brings death. By reflection, then, *proper bane* becomes ambiguous, since it is now water as well as poison.

Ford is fond of the same device, possibly from imitation:

GIOVANNI. Now, now, work serious thoughts on baneful plots;
Be all a man, my soul; let not the curse
Of old prescription rend from me the gall
Of courage, which enrolls a glorious death:
If I must totter like a well-grown oak,
Some undershrubs shall in my weighty fall
Be crushed to splits; with me they all shall perish.

('Tis Pity, v. iii. end.)

Gall is first used as 'spirit to resent insults,' the bitterness which is a proper part of the complete man. (*We have galls: Othello*, iv. iii. 93.) By the next line *galls* have suggested oak-galls (the

¹ This is at least ambiguous in the sense that the reader is puzzled by it; but the definition does not assert that there would be alternative reactions to the passage when completely grasped, or that the effect necessarily marks a complex but integral state of mind in the author. I could claim, I think, that the confusion technique needs separate treatment, and it is put late in the book as showing much logical disorder.

VI

AN ambiguity of the sixth type occurs when a statement says nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements; so that the reader is forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another. We have already considered examples of contradiction which yield a direct meaning, and these might be regarded as in this class; thus Moses, according to the Authorised Version, told the Lord that 'Thou hast not delivered thy people at all,' but 'Delivering thou hast not delivered' is the more direct translation in the margin. 'Though you said you would,' or 'No doubt from your point of view you are delivering us all the time, but it does not seem much to us,' or 'I do not presume to say you are not delivering your people, but I find myself puzzled and unable to say that you are.' In Hebrew this, presumably, is a polite idiom, and cannot fairly be put into the sixth type because its meaning is not in any doubt; the device is in a sense real and active, but it is not conceived as a contradiction.

Contradictions of the same kind, however, when they are used as jokes, fall more definitely into this type, because the reader is meant to be conscious of them as such. The paragraph which describes the appearance of Zuleika Dobson is a pretty example.

Zuleika was not strictly beautiful.

'Do not suppose that she was anything so commonplace; do not suppose that you can easily imagine what she was like, or that she was not, probably, the rather out-of-the-way type that you particularly admire'; in this way (or rather, in the gambit of which this is a parody) jealousy is placated, imagination is set free, and nothing has been said (what *is* this strict type of beauty, anyway?) which can be used against the author afterwards.

Her eyes were a trifle large, and the lashes longer than they need have been.

Not knowing how *large* the *trifle* may be, the reader has no means of being certain whether he would be charmed or appalled. 'but me, from an academic point of view, this face is all wrong; To

SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

never mind me, boys; don't let me spoil your fun.' Her *brow* was *not discreditable*; her hair, we are positively told, was curly. 'I must say I find something very excessive about all this; but you, of course, would have been impressed.'

The mouth was a mere replica of Cupid's bow.

He is becoming petulant; after *not strictly beautiful* it is no kindness to construct her out of *familiar models*; the *flashy-looking creature* had the same face as every one else, only twice as much of it. The eulogy now rises out of apparent understatement into warm but ambiguous praise:

No apple-tree, no wall of peaches, had not been robbed, nor any Tyrian rose-garden, for the glory of Miss Dobson's cheeks. Her neck was imitation-marble. Her hands and feet were of very mean proportions. She had no waist to speak of.

The negatives in the first sentence throw a prim pattern over its lush fullness, force one to think 'no, the tree had not,' and give it, as a doubt in the background, exactly the opposite meaning, as by an Italian or vulgar-English double negative. In the second, of course, her *neck* could only *imitate* marble, but was it imitating *imitation-marble*? the doubt reminds us of the appalling possibilities in imitating many perfectly genuine marbles, and perhaps of the *imitation-marble* environment of her early struggles. And then, since *mean* may be medium, small or without quality; since a waist is at once flesh and the absence of flesh; we are left in doubt whether the last two sentences mean that her beauty was unique and did not depend on the conventional details, or that these parts of her body were, in fact, not good enough to be worth mentioning, or that they were intensely and fashionably small.

This contradiction as to the apparent subject of the statement seems very complete; it is not obvious what we are meant to believe at the end of it. But it cannot be said to represent a conflict in the author's mind; the contradiction removes the reader from the apparent subject to the real one, and the chief 'meaning' of the paragraph, apart from the criticism in its parody, is 'please believe in my story; we have got to take it sufficiently seriously to keep it going.' I hope I need not apologise, after this example, for including Mr. Beerbohm among the poets.

I shall consider what may reasonably be called two ambiguities

AN example of the seventh type of ambiguity, or at any rate of the last type of this series, as it is the most ambiguous that can be conceived, occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind. You might think that such a case could never occur and, if it occurred, could not be poetry, but as a matter of fact it is, in one sense or another, very frequent, and admits of many degrees. One might say, clinging to the logical aspect of this series, that the idea of 'opposite' is a comparatively late human invention, admits of great variety of interpretation (having been introduced wherever there was an intellectual difficulty), and corresponds to nothing in the real world; that $-a : b$ is contrary to a for all values of b ; that words in poetry, like words in primitive languages (and like, say, the Latin *altus*, high or deep, the English *let*, allow or hinder), often state a pair of opposites without any overt ambiguity; that in such a pair you are only stating, for instance, a scale, which might be extended between any two points, though no two points are in themselves opposites; and that in searching for greater accuracy one might say '2 per cent. white' and mean a very black shade of grey. Or one might admit that the criterion in this last type becomes psychological rather than logical, in that the crucial point of the definition has become the idea of a context, and the total attitude to that context of the individual.

A contradiction of this kind may be meaningless, but can never be a blank; it has at least stated the subject which is under discussion, and has given a sort of intensity to it such as one finds in a gridiron pattern in architecture because it gives prominence neither to the horizontals nor to the verticals, and in a check pattern because neither colour is the ground on which the other is placed; it is at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross. Or it may convey an impression of conscious ornamentation such as the Sumerians obtained, in the earliest surviving civilised designs, by putting two beasts in exactly symmetrical attitudes of violence, as in supporting a

coat-of-arms, so that whatever tendencies to action are aroused in the alarmed spectator, however he imagines the victim or the huntsman to have been placed, there is just the same claim on his exclusive attention, with a reassuring impossibility, being made on the other side, and he is drawn taut between the two similar impulses into the stasis of appreciation. You might relate it to the difference of sound heard by the two ears, which decides where the sound is coming from, or to the stereoscopic contradictions that imply a dimension.¹

Opposites, again, are an important element in the Freudian analysis of dreams; and it is evident that the Freudian terminology, particularly the word 'condensation,' could be employed with profit for the understanding of poetry. Now a Freudian opposite at least marks dissatisfaction; the notion of what you want involves the idea that you have not got it, and this again involves the 'opposite defined by your context,' which is what you have and cannot avoid. In more serious cases, causing wider emotional reverberation, such as are likely to be reflected in language, in poetry, or in dreams, it marks a centre of conflict; the notion of what you want involves the notion that you must not take it, and this again involves the 'opposite defined by your context,' that you want something different in another part of your mind. Of course, conflict need not be expressed overtly as contradiction, but it is likely that those theories of aesthetics which regard poetry as the resolution of a conflict will find their illustrations chiefly in the limited field covered by the seventh type.

The study of Hebrew, by the way, and the existence of English Bibles with alternatives in the margin, may have had influence on the capacity of English for ambiguity; Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Crashaw, for instance, were Hebrew scholars, and the flowering of poetry at the end of the sixteenth century corresponded with the first thorough permeation of the English language by the translated texts. This is of interest because

¹ It may be said that the contradiction must somehow form a larger unity if the final effect is to be satisfying. But the onus of reconciliation can be laid very heavily on the receiving end. One could, of course, also introduce much philosophical puzzling about the reconciliation of contradictions. The German tradition in the matter seems eventually based on Indian ideas, best worked out in Buddhism. But I daresay there is more than enough theorising in the text here already.